

“Golden Gavel” Award

Senior members routinely tell new senators that the best way to learn about Senate floor procedure is to spend a significant amount of time in the Senate chamber. For majority-party freshmen, this means taking a turn as temporary presiding officer during quiet periods devoted to routine debate.¹

Until the 1950s, there was little opportunity for such on-the-job training because vice presidents of the United States spent a considerable portion of their time presiding over the Senate—the only duty that the Constitution assigns to that office. This changed in 1953, after Richard Nixon became vice president and shifted the day-to-day focus of his office to activities within the executive branch. Since then, vice presidents appear rarely in the Senate chamber, principally when their vote is needed to break an anticipated tie, or for ceremonial functions. This change has transferred the duties of the presiding officer to the Senate president pro tempore—generally the most senior member of the majority party. In the absence of that official, especially during long periods of routine proceedings when speech-making takes priority over bill-passing, the majority party supplies junior members to preside in hour-long shifts.

In the late 1960s, to encourage freshmen senators to preside, the Senate majority leader created what has become known as the Golden Gavel Award to acknowledge the services of those who preside for one-hundred hours during any year. The award consists of a simple gold-painted wooden gavel, which is formally presented by the Senate’s pages—the sixteen-year-olds who serve four-month terms as messengers. Some freshmen senators have so enjoyed this early mark of distinction that they have sat another hundred hours to take home two gavels. Today, the award of a golden gavel is a matter of some note—at least in the member’s home state—as the majority or minority leader stops other floor business to honor the recipient. On February 12, 1999, at the conclusion of the five-week impeachment trial of President Clinton, the majority and minority leaders presented an honorary Golden Gavel Award to Chief Justice of the United States William Rehnquist in gratitude for the time he spent presiding over that proceeding.

1. Prior to 1997, minority-party senators were allowed to preside.